

Gene Carter continued

His very first job in the industry then, incredibly, was breaking to saddle and galloping unpredictable and potentially dangerous young colts and fillies. “Two green ones working together,” Mr. Carter says of his early experiences atop these yearlings. But his calm manner, patience, and nerve permitted him success with literally every horse he boarded. As he moved on from the farm to galloping Thoroughbreds on the racetrack, his colleagues immediately saw his talent as a “top exercise boy.” He managed to get along with any horse—those characterized as “crazy” or “silly,” or which always seemed to want to run off with a rider. Gene had a true gift for calming horses and being able to quickly determine any specialized handling one needed under saddle, even if it was something as simple as being sung to.

Gene’s talent was a bit of a catch-22. When a new horse arrived at his employer’s barn, Gene was the first rider hoisted onto the runner’s back to test him out. He would feel out the horse and report to the trainer his assessment and what equipment he felt the animal needed. If the horse wasn’t tough to ride, Gene may never end up on his back again; but if it was difficult, Gene had to be the one to keep working him!

Gene’s proudest moment during his racetrack career was Annihilate ‘em’s victory in the 1973 Travers Stakes, the most prestigious American race for three-year-olds outside the Triple Crown events. Gene broke and regularly galloped the chestnut colt with a blazed face for trainer Doug Davis, for whom Gene worked sixteen years. Gene piloted Annihilate ‘em in his final tuneup for the big race, a one-mile work which Gene was instructed to complete between a minute-forty and a minute forty-one seconds. The work was meant to ensure the colt’s fitness for the 1 ¼-mile race. Gene convinced the always-eager Annihilate ‘em that he was out for a mere gallop by standing in the stirrups, and came home in exactly 1:40 2/5. The team was rewarded with a gutsy victory by their ultra-fit colt in the big race. (It is noteworthy that Gene actually led Annihilate ‘em to the post for the Travers as well.)

But the story that seems to enrapture folks more than any other of Gene’s is his very brief venture onto the back of the immortal Man O’ War. Arguably the greatest American Thoroughbred in history, the breathtaking stallion stood most of his stud career at Faraway Farm in Lexington. His groom, Will Harbut, became nearly as famous as his charge for his engaging accounts of Man O’ War and his career. Harbut coined perhaps the most succinctly fitting description of a horse in history: “He was the mostest hoss that ever lived.” Harbut was also renowned for his reverential, yet rather brotherly, relationship with Big Red. (Harbut “handled him just like a pony,” recalls Gene.) They truly were best friends.

Gene attended the same high school as Mr. Harbut’s daughter, Lillian (one of twelve Harbut children). The two took more than a liking to each other, and Gene, also a neighbor of the

Harbuts, sometimes visited Will at Faraway to talk and “get on his good side” in hopes that he would allow Gene and Lillian to date. During this time Gene witnessed many of Mr. Harbut’s Man O’ War talks and showings to awed crowds. Eventually, Will let his daughter and Gene begin dating, and after three years the two married in May of 1947. Mr. Harbut had come to trust Gene, as well as his horsemanship, very much.

One day, Gene recounts, after a visiting group left the farm Harbut asked Gene thoughtfully, “Gene, you come out here quite often and look at Big Red—would you like to get on him?” Gene, of course, replied instantly, “Yes, I’d like to get on him!” He describes the rest of his experience thus:

“(Harbut) said, ‘Well, come on in the stall.’ He just grabbed (Man O’ War) by the halter, grabbed me by my foot, threw me up on him...(Harbut) said, ‘Now, pet him on the neck!’ And I (did)—he said, ‘Now get down.’ He said, ‘Now you can say you been on Big Red, and you won’t be tellin’ no lie.’ That was it.”

That seconds-long event was one of the most memorable of Gene’s life.

Certainly, Gene has more absorbing highlights of his life in the industry. Another of his proud moments, of which at the time he didn’t even wish to be a part, was getting a taste of being a jockey. Doug Davis held an event at his High Hope Farm each year, in which a few non-official races were run. (The “High Hope Steeplechase” eventually moved here to the Kentucky Horse Park and is always a favorite local event when it is held.) All proceeds went to charity. Davis basically commanded Gene to ride his Royal Mattar in the “Lane’s End” race at the 1967 event. After working several horses that rain-drenched morning, the last thing Gene wanted to do was climb aboard another mount that day. But he did, grudgingly, and became the only African-American to that point to ride in the event. He took the lead early, almost to get it over with sooner, and never looked back. For the only time in his career Gene took a winner’s photo as the victor of a race. He now displays that photo proudly.

Doug Davis died in 1976; and, after thirty-two years of breaking and galloping horses both on the farm and at the track, Gene was invited to work at Bruce Hundley’s Saxony Farm, where he stayed for the next twenty-five years. His first assignment there was putting up fencing; but within a matter of weeks, he was supervising the breaking of all the farm’s yearlings, which he did until retiring from the farm in 2002. Gene also prepared yearlings for the sales. He prepped and led to the sale ring a colt who sold for over \$7 million in 1984, still one of the highest prices ever paid for a yearling at auction.

Sadly, just as Gene was about to retire, Lillian developed and eventually was taken by breast cancer. Not wishing to be idle after her passing, Gene sought work again and soon found his

recurring seasonal position at the Kentucky Horse Park. Needless to say, the powers that be were very impressed by his résumé and demeanor. Mr. Carter has been a fixture at the Park for nine years now, and has his experiences of handling the likes of Cigar, John Henry, Funny Cide, and others to add to his list of indelible memories.

Ironically enough, though, after more than fifty-five years of working exclusively with Thoroughbreds, Gene's best equine friend has been the Saddlebred, CH Gypsy Supreme, who lived at the Hall of Champions for nine years until his passing in 2010 at age twenty-three. These two shared a very special bond indeed; they each loved especially to go out for Gypsy's daily graze. Other employees handled and loved Gypsy as well, but never did the sensitive gelding feel so happy and at ease as when he stood at the end of Gene's shank. The pair's attachment to each other was truly touching.

Today, Gene reflects on his life with great fondness. He worked very hard, was away from home a lot, and had a risky job in the prime of his life, but he wouldn't trade his experiences. And he's hardly stopped making memories. Gene has eight loving children and several grand- and great-grandchildren that bring abundant joy to his life. And he still has his horses. These constants and staying so active are why Gene's "still above ground," as he reckons. Every day continues to bestow new experiences. And we at the Kentucky Horse Park are proud to hold a chapter in this fascinating man's ongoing story of life.